THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
The Homecoming

December 22, 1996

John M. Buchanan

I cannot claim that I have found the home I long for every day of my life, not by a long shot, but I believe that in my heart I have found, and have maybe always known, the way that leads to it. I believe the home we long for and belong to is finally where Christ is. I believe that home is Christ's kingdom, which exists both within us and among us as we wind our prodigal ways through the world in search of it.

Frederick Buechner
The Longing for Home

FOURTH
PRESBY
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THE HOMECOMING

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Fourth Presbyterian Church
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Scripture
"All went to their own towns..."
Luke 2:3

One of my fondest Christmas memories is of this day, or close to it, 1959. It was the day after the last final test of my first quarter at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, and Sue and I, with a new 6-week-old baby, packed up our aging Ford with the gifts we had purchased at Carson Pirie Scott, feeling more urbane and sophisticated than we ever had before, or have since, for that matter, and headed for home. My memory includes driving in the pre-dawn darkness up over the Skyway, east to Pennsylvania, seeing stars and singing "We Three Kings of Orient Are – Star of Wonder, Star of Light, Westward Leading." I changed it to "Eastward Leading" and thought I was very clever. We drove all day – and what a homecoming it was!

Until this year, 37 years later, I have not come home for Christmas. Because I am a minister and have my hands full at Christmas, parents, children, grandchildren have come to where I was living. But this year, we have been traveling, representing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and on December 19, after visiting the Presbyterian Churches in Honolulu, and preaching at the Marine Base at Keneohe and spending time with our Presbyterian army, navy and marine chaplains, we went to the airport and headed, eagerly and gratefully, home for Christmas.

On Tuesday, we were on our way to lunch with Presbyterian leaders in Honolulu. On the expressway, our driver, Peter Tschou, pointed out the Punchbowl, an ancient volcanic crater that had been a burial place and was now the United States Military Cemetery, the Arlington of the Pacific. "Would you like to see it?" he asked.

I said we would like to see it and we drove up the hill and onto the well-kept grounds, looked at the memorial statue and the neat, orderly graves of U.S. veterans of World War II, Korea, Viet Nam and other conflicts. Ernie Pyle's grave is there as well as the Hawaiian member of the Challenger crew.

As we were driving out of the grounds, past the little office where the records were kept, I asked Peter if he minded if we stopped just for a minute. I had an uncle who was killed in WWII, a Marine, on Saipan. I didn't know where he was buried. I always assumed it was where he died, on that tiny South Pacific island. I entered the little office, found the book with the computer printouts of Ls, Ms, and Ns, quickly flipped to McC – McCormick. There it was. John C. McCormick, Pennsylvania, USMC, WWII, Section C, Grave 0061.

I was stunned. He was my mother's brother, the youngest of a big family of seven children – all of whom are gone now and only two of whom had children. There are no more McCormicks. He was the baby of the family, everybody's favorite. Jack, they called him, John Calvin McCormick, named by my grandparents for John Calvin, the founder of their Presbyterian faith.

When I was born, my parents named me for him – John McCormick. He enlisted after Pearl Harbor. The last time we saw him was Christmas, on furlough before he shipped out to the Pacific.

I can remember him. I was in kindergarten at the time. And I can remember him and my mother, his older sister, walking through the snow to pick me up at Mrs. Jones' school. He was in his olive drab uniform.

He died on June 22, 1944.

I found his grave, located on the first row, beside the main roadway.

John C. McCormick, USMC
Pennsylvania
August 4, 1920 - June 22, 1944
Saipan

I am the only one to have seen his grave. Neither of his parents, none of his brothers and sisters ever traveled to Hawaii. But I found him. One week before Christmas, 1996 and in a strange way, it was for me, a homecoming.

Are you going home for Christmas this year? Or have you come home? Highways and airports are crowded with travelers. More people travel during the last ten days of December than at any other time and most of them are going home. Preachers learn over the years, that the Sunday nearest to Christmas, while often good in terms of attendance, is an unusual Sunday. Many of the regular attendees are absent – gone home. In their places are others, from other places, people who have come home.

Garrison Keilor did a monologue about it one time and included it in his book, Leaving Home. He calls it Exiles and tells about how they all return to Lake Wobegone for Christmas . . .

> Over at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, mass is full of exiles, lapsed Catholics who are too busy or indolent for church but come for Christmas to hear the music, see the candles, smell the incense and feel hopeful.
>
> Dozens of exiles are back, including some whom their families weren't expecting because they said they weren't coming, couldn't come, were sorry, but it was just out of the question. But Christmas exerts powerful forces. We turn a corner in a crowded shopping mall and a few bars of a tune turn a switch on in our heads and gates open and tons of water thunder through Hoover Dam, the big turbines spin, electricity flows and we get in our car and go back, like salmon. [p. 181-182]

What is it about Christmas that turns us – physically, and if not physically, certainly emotionally and spiritually, toward home? "I'll be home for Christmas," the sentimental seasonal favorite puts it, "if only in my dreams." "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to

know," Bing Crosby crooned for homesick GI's during WWII and Nat King Cole , and now Natalie Cole, still transports us with "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire," even if we don't have a fireplace and never in our lives personally roasted a chestnut. Is it merely sentiment?

I think not. I think there is something about Christmas and our going home that reveals an important truth about us.

Wallace Stegner, distinguished American author, wrote a short story, Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood, in which he describes his life as the son of a father who was a gambler and a drifter, footloose, never settling down in one place for long, and how in college he began to experience of all things, "homesickness - exacerbated by the fact that there wasn't much of a home to be sick for." [Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs, p. 18]

Frederick Buechner titled his new book, The Longing for Home. The word "Home," Buechner says, " summons up a place where you feel, or did feel once, uniquely at home, which is to say a place where you feel you belong and which in some sense belongs to you.." [p. 7]

Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, on the same topic, writes powerfully, "What a strong hunger the human heart has for home, not just a building but a place to belong, a place to be from and a place to go to. A safe place where one is known and a safe place from which to know the world: a nest, a family, a stable fortress in a vast and often frightening universe." [The Preaching Life, p. 156]

We know the power of that, do we not? Even without the benefit of psychology and sociology, we know how important it is to have a place to belong, a place where you are welcome and safe, a place where the lights are on waiting for you, a place where people know your name. In Brazil, where the gap between the rich and the poor is enormous, and where in many places there are simply no social services, parents sometimes simply abandon their children and they become what we have come to know as street children, living on the street, begging and stealing what they can, sleeping in doorways, rummaging through garbage. In some communities in Brazil it has been long rumored that street children are simply rounded up and eliminated, "disappeared," they call it.

For many, the only thing resembling home is a church-sponsored shelter – some overnight, mostly simply a day shelter where there is a bowl of soup and a friendly face. In Fortaleza, a tropical port city of more than a million, we visited a small Presbyterian Church on the edge of an enormous slum. I was overwhelmed at the number of children on the street, playing in trash-strewn lots, falling down buildings. It was the end of the day. As we left the little church building, a mission worker and several volunteers were arriving to make soup and outside a huge crowd assembled – the children, waiting for soup, each holding a bowl, cup, empty tin can.

Home doesn't exist for the underclass our system has created right here – not far from the Magnificent Mile. Home – non-existent for the children of America who will begin soon to personally pay the price for the election victories won by politicians this fall promising welfare reform.

If you are blessed this morning, you can recall and do recall that home where you were known and safe and loved If you are blessed you had a home like that to remember and in your heart of hearts, you long for it still and at Christmas you return to it, if not actually, then in memory or in the customs of that home which you carefully, almost reverently observe: the special way you decorate the tree, place the star, arrange the nativity.

It is a religious rite, after all. It is a longing for home and it is very deep within us. No less an authority than Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "The human spirit is incapable of ridding itself of its sense of homelessness. The essential homelessness of the human spirit is the ground of all religion." [Douglas John Hall, Professing the Faith, p. 207]

The Bible suggests that homesickness is not merely a sentimental phenomenon. It is our condition. The story of Israel begins with a search for home ... "A wandering Aramean was my father..." [Deut. 26:5] words recited annually by the Jewish people to remind them that wherever they are they are not forgotten by God, that God is their true home.

When they were in actual exile in the sixth century BCE, their poets and prophets wrote beautifully about home and homesickness, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Make straight in the desert a highway" – you're going home. [Isaiah 40:1]

New Testament the theme is continued. The writer of Hebrews, "These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar. People who speak thus are seeking a homeland." [Heb. 11:13-14]

In his fine new book, The Good Book, Peter Gomes, preacher to the University at Harvard, lists the five questions modern college students are asking. One of them is "Am I on my own?" Gomes says, "Students in their private confessions of soul, while they are anxious and fearful and full of the insecurities of youth, speak more often of loneliness than of anything else."

What they are all writing and talking about – theologian, author, ancient prophet, modern preacher, and what we all experience at this time of year, is what God had in mind. We are, in a very real sense, lost until we find God, or are found by God: lost not in the sense of being damned, but lost in the sense of not having that place where we are known and welcomed and at home. What this season does to us is, I believe, exactly what God had in mind in the improbable birth in Bethlehem, namely makes us homesick, turns us toward home, reminds us that until we find our ultimate home we are, in a very real sense, lost, and separated and empty.

Taylor calls it "God's tug at our hearts" -- the homing instinct God has created in us, and asks, "Have you felt it? The sense that there is a place you belong that you have gotten separated from, a place that misses you as much as you miss it and that is calling you to return only you do not know where or how to get there. All you know is that you are not there yet, and that your life will not be complete until your are." [p. 158]

The way home is the road to Bethlehem. Your home – the place where you are known and welcomed, the home where you are loved and ultimately safe from all harm – is where Jesus

Christ is. And among all the things that happen to us during these busy, frantic days, this we all share. The road opens up suddenly and we start down it once again to Bethlehem, to welcome a child, to stand in quiet awe before the holiness of love, to wonder .... A Homecoming.

Are you going this Christmas?

Dear God, we thank you for the homes to which we return in this season. We thank you that in Bethlehem, in the presence of your love incarnate, we know ourselves to be home, forever, safe, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.